DEscribing to Create Mood AND MeanIng

In its creation of mood and its suggestion of a larger meaning (the meaning of life itself), James Agee's description of Shady Grove, Alabama, is an extraordinary small classic. It combines place (a southern cemetery) and natural event (death); more than that, it provides "data" which are so strange as to be barely believable. Yet we are moved to belief because the painstakingly rendered details and the matter-of-fact tone give the piece a documentary solidness. On the one hand, the description provides objectively verifiable, measurable facts ("The graveyard is about fifty by a hundred yards . . ."); on the other hand, it provides vivid sense impressions rendered in poetic images ("It is heavily silent and fragrant and all the leaves are breathing slowly . . ."). For many reasons, and on many levels, this essay in description will repay your close study.

Shady Grove, Alabama, July 1936

James Agee

The graveyard is about fifty by a hundred yards inside a wire fence. There are almost no trees in it: a lemon verbena and a small magnolia; it is all red clay and very few weeds.

Out at the front of it across the road there is a cornfield and then a field of cotton and then trees.

Most of the headboards are pine, and at the far end of the yard from the church the graves are thinned out and there are many slender and low pine stumps about the height of the headboards. The shadows are all struck sharp lengthwise of the graves, toward the cornfield, by the afternoon sun. There is no one anywhere in sight. It is heavily silent and fragrant and all the leaves are breathing slowly without touching each other.

Some of the graves have real headstones, a few of them so large they must be the graves of landowners. One is a thick limestone log erected by the Woodmen of the World. One or two of the others, besides a headpiece, have a flat of stone as large as the whole grave.

On one of these there is a china dish on whose cover delicate hands lie crossed, cuffs at their wrists, and the nails distinct.

On another a large fluted vase stands full of dead flowers, with an inch of rusty water at the bottom.

On others of these stones, as many as a dozen of them, there is something I have never seen before: by some kind of porcelain reproduction, a photograph of the person who is buried there; the last or the best likeness that had been made, in a small-town studio, or at home with a snapshot camera. I remember one well of a fifteen-year-old boy in Sunday pants and a plaid pull-over sweater, his hair combed, his cap in his hand, sitting against a piece of farm machinery and grinning. His eyes are squinted against the light and his nose makes a deep shadow down one side of his chin. Somebody's arm, with the sleeve rolled up, is against him; somebody who is almost certainly still alive; they could not cut him entirely out of the picture. Another is a studio portrait, close up, in artificial lighting, of a young woman. She is leaned a little forward, smiling, vivaciously, one hand at her
cheek. She is not very pretty, but she believed she was; her face is free from strain or fear. She is wearing an evidently new dress, with a mail-order look about it; patterns of beads are sewn over it and have caught the light. Her face is soft with powder and at the wings of her nose lines have been deleted. Her dark blonde hair is newly washed and professionally done up in puffs at the ears which in that time, shortly after the first great war of her century, were called cootie garages. This image of her face is split across and the split has begun to turn brown at its edges.

I think these would be graves of small farmers.

There are others about which there can be no mistake: they are the graves of the poorest of the farmers and of the tenants. Mainly they are the graves with the pine headboards; or without them.

When the grave is still young, it is very sharply distinct, and of a peculiar form. The clay is raised in a long and narrow oval with a sharp ridge, the shape exactly of an inverted boat. A fairly broad board is driven at the head; a narrower one, sometimes only a stub, at the feet. A good many of the headboards have been sawed into the flat simulacrum of an hourglass; in some of these, the top has been roughly rounded off, so that the resemblance is more nearly that of a head and shoulders sunken or risen to the waist in the dirt. On some of these boards names and dates have been written or printed in hesitant letterings, in pencil or in crayon, but most of them appear never to have been touched in this way. The boards at some of the graves have fallen slantwise or down; many graves seem never to have been marked except in their own carefully made shape. These graves are of all sizes between those of giants and of newborn children; and there are a great many, so many they seem shoals of minnows, two feet long and less, lying near one another, and of these smallest graves, very few are marked with any wood at all, and many are already so drawn into the earth that they are scarcely distinguishable. Some of the largest, on the other hand, are of heroic size, seven and eight feet long, and of these more are marked, a few, even, with the smallest and plainest blocks of limestone, and initials, once or twice a full name; but many more of them have never been marked, and many, too, are sunken half down and more and almost entirely into the earth. A great many of these graves, perhaps half to two thirds of those which are still distinct, have been decorated, not only with shrunked flowers in their cracked vases and with bent targets of blasted flowers, but otherwise as well. Some have a line of white clamshells planted along their ridge; of others, the rim as well is garlanded with these shells. On one large grave, which is otherwise completely plain, a blown-out electric bulb is screwed into the clay at the exact center. On another, on the slope of clay just in front of the headboard, its feet next the board, is a horseshoe; and at its center a blown bulb is stood upright. On two or three others there are insulators of bluegreen glass. On several graves, which I presume to be those of women, there is at the center the prettiest or the oldest and most valued piece of china: on one, a blue glass butter dish whose cover is a setting hen; on another, an intricate milk-colored glass basket; on others, ten-cent-store candy dishes and iridescent vases; on one, a pattern of white and colored buttons. On other graves there are small and thick white butter dishes of the sort which are used in lunch-rooms, and by the action of rain these stand free of the grave on slender turrets of clay. On still another grave, laid carefully next the headboard, is a corncob pipe. On the graves of children there are still these pretty pieces of glass and china, but they begin to diminish in size and they verge into the forms of animals and into
homuncular symbols of growth; and there are toys: small autos, locomotives and
fire engines of red and blue metal; tea sets for dolls, and tin kettles the size of
thimbles; little effigies in rubber and glass and china, of cows, lions, bulldogs,
squeaking mice, and the characters of comic strips; and... what two parents have
done here for their little daughter: not only a tea set, and a cocacola bottle, and a
milk bottle, ranged on her short grave, but a stone at the head and a stone at the
foot, and in the headstone her six month image as she lies sleeping dead in her
white dress, the head sunken delicately forward, deeply and delicately gone,
the eyes seamed, as that of a dead bird, and on the rear face of this stone the
words:

We can't have all things to please us,
Our little Daughter, Joe An, has gone to Jesus.

DISCUSSION AND EXERCISES

1. Study the selection and organization of details in the following paragraphs and answer
the following questions:
   a. Is there a topic sentence, and if so, how does it function?
   b. Is the observer fixed or moving?
   c. List the individual details in each paragraph and indicate in what ways they are
      judiciously chosen. Which does the author present with camera-like objectivity
      and which does he render subjectively and feelingly? Which senses does he appeal
      to (sight or sound)?
   d. Contemplate the spatial pattern of the paragraph; trace its movement from first to
      last sentence, indicating what point of view and principle of organization govern the
      arrangement of details. Does the writer move from left to right; from top to bottom;
      in order of prominence ("the first thing one sees on entering the room...")? Analyze
      and explain.
   e. Does the paragraph convey a dominant mood or impression? If so, how does the
      writer create it? Consider such matters as choice of words, sense images, projection
      of feeling.

   One November evening, in the neighbourhood of Lyndhurst, I saw a
   flock of geese marching in a long procession, led, as their custom is, by a
   majestical gander; they were coming home from their feeding-ground in
   the forest, and when I spied them were approaching their owner's cottage.
   Arrived at the wooden gate of the garden in front of the cottage, the leading
   bird drew up square before it, and with repeated loud screams demanded
   admittance. Pretty soon, in response to the summons, a man came out of
   the cottage, walked briskly down the garden path and opened the gate,
   but only wide enough to put his right leg through; then, placing his foot
   and knee against the leading bird, he thrust him roughly back; as he did
   so three young geese pressed forward and were allowed to pass in; then
   the gate was slammed in the face of the gander and the rest of his followers,
   and the man went back to the cottage. The gander's indignation was fine
to see, though he had most probably experienced the same rude treatment on many previous occasions. Drawing up to the gate again he called more loudly than before; then deliberately lifted a leg, and placing his broad webbed foot like an open hand against the gate actually tried to push it open! His strength was not sufficient; but he continued to push and to call until the man returned to open the gate and let the birds go in.

It was an amusing scene, and the behaviour of the bird struck me as characteristic.

—W. H. Hudson, *Birds and Man*

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green fields and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-boats; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wraith-like skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

—Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

2. a. Evaluate the effectiveness of the separate images in Kincade’s “Coming to Antigua.”
   b. Write a one-paragraph description of the room in which you are now sitting. Begin the paragraph as follows: “As I look around the room, this is what I see.” Be sure to follow a principle of organization that best fulfills the purpose you set for yourself. Begin by using prewriting techniques.

3. In a paragraph (150–250 words) describe a person, place, setting, or event in such a way that you project one of the following moods or atmospheres:

   bustling activity  poverty  loneliness
   calm and quiet   beauty  despair
   sloppiness  luxury  gaiety
   cleanliness  fear  ugliness
   deprivation  suspicion

4. In a paragraph (150–250 words), describe a season of the year, an aspect of a season, or a particular mood or emotion associated with a particular month (“April is the cruelest month,” wrote T. S. Eliot, “mixing memory and desire”). Try to place your topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph.

5. As in Andy Rooney’s essay on “Fences” there are many subquestions that Johnathan Spence was compelled to ask—consciously or unconsciously—before he could